

Becoming comfortable with discomfort

Understanding how prevalent failure is in all walks of life is crucial to our wellbeing, argues **Jeff Weston**



A few things struck me while researching this article. Firstly, Nick Luxmoore's telling, quite beautiful lines in relation to school children from 2015: 'What if we fail? What will we be worth then?'¹ Secondly, Theodore Roosevelt's reassuring quote: 'Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to... rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows [not] victory nor defeat.'² And, thirdly, my own defeats, misfires and knock backs over the years.

Failure enters the therapy room in many forms – through anger, anxiety, depression, despair, loneliness, paranoia and many other presenting issues. And yet, it's still taboo.

Society is constructed around success, winning, joy, celebration – a polished exterior which sometimes hides suffering, struggle and frustration. We pull ourselves out of bed each morning, say 'Not bad' when asked how we are, and plod on, occasionally looking at the people around us, wondering to ourselves: 'Are they *really* content?'

Failure is the grown-up noun in this respect. It's much more mature than success. It grapples with everything before it. It weighs up the world – how it operates, what it could do better, whether we're in harmony with it, what the likelihood is of us convincing someone to have faith in our abilities. The backdrop to this is that things stick with us. Our past is never quite shed.

During the 1980s when I attended secondary school, we had overall class positions based on all the subjects we were studying. Mine was 21/28. In other words, I was at the bottom of the third quartile. Not a great place to be! Not a terribly hopeful place! And yet I regularly finished first or second in my maths set and so that had to be my focus, my 'feel good' place, my self-belief system.

When it came to my O-levels, I failed English language and literature, physics, control technology and woodwork. My mind wasn't ready. I had no idea how to revise or prepare for that terrible, unnatural silence, sat in examination halls. Numbers were my

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serendipitous ally (I achieved an 'A' in maths), but words seemed to haul me to the floor. I don't recall being told *why* they were important, what use they would serve, or why the text before me would in any way shape my life. The whole thing seemed like a factory rather than something meaningful.

We each have our trajectories; that's what I'm trying to say. And despite being '...bombarded by what happiness [and thus success] should look like',³ it's better to stand back and not allow such a narrative to ensnare our thoughts. Protecting what's in our heads is vital. Honouring our own direction of travel is essential, rather than bowing to transient trends or mushy, misguided rhetoric.

It's easy to fall in line, much harder to stand our ground and be authentic. Much harder to recognise and respect that purpose inside us which, even though it's whittled down at times by the forces and harsh winds of society, is still

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- 2 Goodreads. Theodore Roosevelt Quotes. [Online.] <https://tinyurl.com/3mkajmhw> (accessed 23 June 2024).
- 3 Read N. Why I believe acceptance should be a more explicit goal. [Blog.] <https://tinyurl.com/mufvzuxt> (accessed 23 June 2024).

our calling. I didn't imagine aged 15 that I would want to write. After all, numbers were my thing. They were straightforward. There was no trickery as such. No interpretation. No horsing around. Just solutions. That great feeling of finding answers. Words, by comparison, tease you. Like a seductive lover. You can never be entirely sure of their loyalty, their sticking around. They are provocative, flirtatious, shameless even. And yet, from my early 20s, that's where my new thirst lay. That's where my trajectory took me. And I couldn't say no.

Had I hung around with numbers, I don't think I would have been enriched. I don't think I would have traversed as many beautiful lands. Failure was a necessary port in those early days, if only to teach me to go into battle more prepared, more original and resilient, with substance as well as style. But I would still, interestingly, approach editors with a flicker of doubt – not knowing for sure that I could deliver what I was proposing, just that I had to 'put myself out there', take the risk, accept a deadline, with the slight possibility that I could very easily fall on my face.

Unfinished throughout our lives

Reading Luxmoore's contribution concerning young people resonated enormously with me, therefore. 'Hearing about other people's successes is all very well, but young people are more interested in hearing about their failures. They want to know about all the things that went wrong, the mistakes, the stupidities, the misunderstandings, the personal limitations... The rhetoric of Success! Success! Success! has

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invaded schools as it's invaded other areas of life, encouraged by “inspirational” business leaders, “aspirational” politicians and “positive” psychologists.¹ Indeed. If the default in life is failure and struggle *before* success, however modest, then stress and anxiety lessen.

We evolve. We improve. We change. Perfection and its glittering companion don't exist. We remain unfinished throughout our lives. Just creatures who would be healthier and more confident focusing on our '...efforts, not [our] results'.⁴ If only young people, young adults and those suffering anxiety and despair were taught '...one of the most important lessons in life – *how to fail*'.⁴ It sounds truly ridiculous in a way, like we're aiming for that. But what it actually means is *dealing* with failure.

Even the simple exercise of summarising the 'greats' in a better context is helpful and constructive: Stephen Spielberg – '...rejected twice by the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts';⁵ Thomas Edison – '...told by his teachers he was “too stupid to learn anything”';⁵ Albert Einstein – '...as a child he didn't start speaking until he was four, reading until he was seven';⁵ Abraham Lincoln – '...achieved the unique feat of leaving for... war a captain and returning [as] a private';⁵ Jerry Seinfeld – '...first time on stage [upon] seeing the audience he froze and was booed and jeered off';⁵ Vincent van Gogh – produced more than 900 paintings, but '...sold just one... during his lifetime';⁵ Elvis Presley – '...after his first performance at the Grand Ole Opry [Nashville, Tennessee]... he was promptly

fired [with the words] “You ain't goin' nowhere, son. You ought to go back to drivin' a truck.”⁵

Other people's words

Other people's words get inside us, but it's how we deal with such setbacks, and how strong our conviction and faith in our own efforts are that matter. I'm often shocked by how flattened some of my younger adult clients seem; their experiences in school; the daily drip of social media infecting them with unrealistic expectations, together with the simulated happiness of others; the cost of living and needing to 'keep up'. I don't envy them. In fact, such a technological future makes my own aimless, leisurely past, full of outdoor sport and carefree days – often just lying on my bed, dreaming and listening to music – seem idyllic.

We need to stop other people's suppositions and notions from clogging up our heads, therefore. We need to respect the stance and tenet inside us. Easier said than done? Yes, but this is where we either decide to confront life and keep something of ourselves, or throw our entire character onto the sacrificial fire; a fire not lit by us, but those who often adhere to the safe status quo.

Failure comes in many forms: '...undervaluing [our] gifts';⁶ being obsequious to the powerful 'imbeciles'⁶ above us; '...disconnection, disruption or discomfort';⁷ seeing the world, reality, its 'next-to-nothingness';⁷ and giving up; fear/false dreams; not recognising that lateral thinking has its place too; not taking risks. Sometimes, it takes the voice of a fellow traveller to reaffirm what we already know, how we ought to act and why pursuing our goals is vital.

What I love about Nietzsche

My own 'go to' voice is that of Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher – one of existentialism's true fathers. That I relate to a man born 180 years ago in 1844 over many of my contemporaries perhaps says something about me, but it also gives licence to the necessity of falling back on a trusted source and reinforcing your belief system and values. 'Live dangerously',⁸ Nietzsche famously said. He wasn't one for backing down. And however hard that may be in our now super-politically correct, sensitive and often hypocritical world (certainly for most of us), it restores a crucial attitude – that of '...experimentation and individuation (self-direction)'.⁹ Nietzsche isn't suggesting that



we drive at 200mph or initiate a nationwide coup, but he is telling us to be braver and not accept the parochial views of others.

What '...men... fear most is the troubles with which any unconditional honesty and nudity [straightforwardness] would burden them',⁸ he states. Instead, we cower, shrink, shudder and acquiesce at the first sign of unpleasantness; an exchange often tilted in favour of the more senior person. There's no ideal outcome here because we may simply not have the power to change things. What Nietzsche alludes to though – and he was, beware, an unashamedly solitary figure – is us '...daring to show [others] the human being [we are] down to the last muscle'.⁸

The very fact that some people reading this will cry, 'But we can't – we have to be careful, we have to stay in the game, in our lane,

we have to compromise each day', indicates how far from our true selves we are, and why failure hooks itself to our daily endeavours and travails. We should be cautious for 40 or 50 years and then appreciatively accept our state pension. Although this isn't our national narrative, which is arguably full of jingles and entrepreneurship, it's a reality for many. Head down. Take the sh*t they throw at you. Don't see the patronising behaviour of others as wounding, but rather as a necessary hierarchy which steers us from anarchy.

What I love about Nietzsche is his boldness in the face of 'How things are supposed to be', his railing against '...borrowed manners and loosely fitting opinions'.⁸ In some ways, Abraham Maslow latched on to this: 'I think of the self-actualising man not as an ordinary man with something added, but rather as an

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ordinary man with nothing taken away. The average man is a human being with dampened and inhibited powers.¹⁰

Few guarantees in life

We've had something knocked out of us, it seems. Throughout our lives, we're constantly told to show discipline and grace, perhaps at the expense of rugged discovery. And yet, such a staunch ideology fits with the individual psychology of Alfred Adler: 'All failures – neurotics, psychotics, criminals, drunkards, problem children, suicides... and prostitutes – are failures because they are lacking in social interest. They approach the problems of occupation, friendship, and sex without the confidence that they can be solved by co-operation. The meaning they give to life is a private meaning.'¹¹

It's an interesting, if faulty, analysis. Adler touches upon failure at the extreme end of things with certain classifications of people, but goes overboard with his generalisations and assumptions concerning social interest, co-operation and private meaning. Moreover, he asserts that all failures are 'pampered in childhood',¹¹ as if one cannot pull away from such luxury, and show effort and determination in adulthood.

4 Gilbert P. The compassionate mind. Miami, FL: Robinson; 2013.

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6 Aaron D. Portrait of a failure. [Online.] <https://tinyurl.com/4dstdjbm> (accessed 28 June 2024).

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9 Weston J. Nietzsche and psychotherapy. [Online.] <https://tinyurl.com/5dekhkxr> (accessed 28 June 2024).

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11 Ansbacher HL, Rowena R (eds). The individual psychology of Alfred Adler. New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks; 1964.



A curious, rare coming together of Nietzschean and Adlerian thought occurs here, however: 'The neurotic... sees everything with the eyes of his vanity. He approaches every situation and problem of life with fearful anticipation as to whether his prestige will be assured, seldom finds this to be the case, and therefore feels compelled to withdraw from the problems of life.'¹¹ I feel confident that Nietzsche would agree with this observation. Prestige – can it matter too much? Does it become a convenient excuse for avoiding things? If we're relatively established, then should we settle for this or push on? Do repeated failures unsettle us and lead to an inevitable retreat?

There are few guarantees in life. Sometimes it's as if my clients are saying to me, 'I have half a girl and half a job. Neither feel entirely *right*

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and yet I struggle on, accept my lot. Or maybe because I'm here with you, I'm searching for a way out, a new way forward, so the grinning leviathan of failure smiles a little less.'

Nietzsche teaches us to face things no matter what our station in life and no matter what the potential outcome. Pride. Prestige. Vanity. Image. Reputation. Hierarchy. To hell with it.

'The human being who does not wish to belong to the mass must merely cease being comfortable with himself,'¹² he wrote. That may seem a little counterintuitive, but becoming comfortable with uncomfortableness tempers and reduces fear, stress, anxiety, worry and all manner of symptoms. Loading ourselves up with challenging situations means that we shift from beginner to experienced performer. We become more battle-hardened and venturesome.

It's how we react to events that's important

Each time I get a new counselling client, that first session feels like peeking out behind the curtain at a theatre with the client as the audience. What will he or she be like? Will I be able to handle what comes my way? Do I have the skills, knowledge, sensitivity and benevolence to help this person who's taken the brave step of unravelling his or her life to a stranger? The prospect of letting someone down and coming up short isn't a good one, yet I know I must throw myself into such a den because if I don't, I would be hiding, tucked up with pride, prestige and vanity; those characteristics that we all have, but which need a regular airing.

Only the other day I had a phone consultation with a prospective client that didn't go well. I realised afterwards that I had talked too much (rare for me), and that what I did say lacked finesse. Language, the thing I've grown to love, temporarily failed me, came back to haunt me – like I was in school again. Consequently, I failed the person on the other end of the line. I didn't successfully project who I was and why they should have faith in me. The words from the beginning of this article – 'What if we fail? What will we be worth then?'¹¹ – effectively slotted themselves inside me.

What was I worth after a bad day? Pretty much the same, I decided. That had to be the only sensible conclusion. Even better than that, I should be 'at ease amid the ruins'¹⁷ –

the title of Robert Harrison's piece. It's quite a dramatic statement, but big ruin or little ruin, our coping mechanisms respond to the trajectories we give ourselves. And we choose to live our lives either passively (determined) or actively (free will).¹² Given existentialism's penchant for free will, mistakes and guilt are part of the landscape, but it's how we react to events that's important. This is where we grow up. Indeed, '...a willingness to court failure [is] a precursor to growth'.¹³

Adler speaks of failure as if it's final, a lead weight, the end. What he ignores, what he misses, is existentialism's creed, its '...notion of the dynamic self; [us not having] a fixed core'.¹² Social interest and co-operation are all well and good, but we must save something for ourselves, and we mustn't panic when things go wrong, but rather propel and drive forward again.

I sense that all my clients over the years have been tinged with failure – through relationships, projects, jobs, people and the world at large – but understanding how prevalent failure is in all walks of life, understanding its ubiquity and pervasiveness are crucial to our wellbeing. The world beats us down in multiple ways, but we get up again. We must get up and look at our horizon in a more long-term way, and turn 'self-criticism [into] self-acceptance'.³ ●

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YOUR THOUGHTS, PLEASE

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¹³ Mundy L. Losing is the new winning. [Online.] <https://tinyurl.com/8c9wr2m6> (accessed 30 June 2024).